

IN THE CLAIMS:

Please cancel Claims 1-15 without prejudice to or disclaimer of the subject matter presented therein.

Please add new Claims 16-24 as follows.

1 - 15 (Cancelled)

16. (New) An image processing apparatus comprising:  
input means for inputting image information;  
determination means for sequentially repeating determination of whether a mark indicative of a specific image is contained in an input image whenever precision of sampling of the image information is raised in stages or whenever a number of quantization bits of the image information is increased in stages;

setting means for setting an allowable time period necessary for the determination to be made by the determination means; and

control means for terminating determination processing performed by the determination means in a case where it can be determined whether the mark indicative of a specific image is contained in the input image within the allowable time period set by the setting means, and for determining that the mark indicative of a specific image is not contained in the input image and terminating the determination processing performed by the determination means even during the determination processing performed by the determination means in a case where it cannot be determined that the mark indicative of a specific image is contained in the input image within the allowable time period set by the setting means.

17. (New) The image processing apparatus according to Claim 16, wherein a threshold value for determining in the determination means whether the mark indicative of a specific image is contained in the input image is provided for each stage of the precision.

18. (New) The image processing apparatus according to Claim 16, further comprising output means for outputting the image that is input by the input means to printing means,

wherein the output means outputs the input image in a case where the mark indicative of a specific image is not detected within the allowable time period.

19. (New) The image processing apparatus according to Claim 18, wherein a period of time that satisfies the relation below is set as the allowable time period:

$$Tav \leq (M - H)/m$$

where  $H$  represents time needed for the output means to form an output image,  $M$  represents a critical time at which the printing means waits for print data to be received and at which a printing operation performed by the printing means enters a waiting state,

$m$  represents number of times the determination means executes determination processing, and

$Tav$  represents the allowable time period per determination processing.

20. (New) The image processing apparatus according to Claim 18, wherein the output means is suspended to output the input image in a case where the determination means determines that the mark indicative of a specific image is contained in the input image.

21. (New) The image processing apparatus according to Claim 16, wherein the allowable time period is dynamically variable.

22. (New) The image processing apparatus according to Claims 16, wherein the mark indicative of a specific image includes a watermark.

23. (New) An image processing method comprising:  
an input step of inputting image information;  
a determination step of sequentially repeating determination of whether a mark indicative of a specific image is contained in an input image whenever precision of sampling of the image information is raised in stages or whenever a number of quantization bits of the image information is increased in stages;  
a setting step of setting an allowable time period necessary for the determination to be made at the determination step; and  
a control step of terminating determination processing performed at the determination step in a case where it can be determined whether the mark indicative of a specific image is contained in the input image within the allowable time period set at the setting step, and of determining that the mark indicative of a specific image is not contained in the input image

and terminating the determination processing performed at the determination step even during the determination processing performed at the determination step in a case where it cannot be determined that the mark indicative of a specific image is contained in the input image within the allowable time period set at the setting step.

24. (New) A storage medium storing program code read in and executed by a computer, the storage medium comprising:

program code of an input step of inputting image information;

program code of a determination step of sequentially repeating determination of whether a mark indicative of a specific image is contained in an input image whenever precision of sampling of the image information is raised in stages or whenever a number of quantization bits of the image information is increased in stages;

program code of a setting step of setting an allowable time period necessary for the determination to be made at the determination step; and

program code of a control step of terminating determination processing performed at the determination step in a case where it can be determined whether the mark indicative of a specific image is contained in the input image within the allowable time period set at the setting step, and of determining that the mark indicative of a specific image is not contained in the input image and terminating the determination processing performed at the determination step even during the determination processing performed at the determination step in a case where it cannot be determined that the mark indicative of a specific image is contained in the input image within the allowable time period set at the setting step.